O for a
Muse of fire,
that would ascend
the brightest
heaven of invention!
A kingdom for a stage,
princes to act,
and monarchs
to behold
the swelling
scene!

Shakespeare's Language—
A Teacher's Toughest Task
And Greatest Pleasure

You know the old joke: Question—name the top five problems with teaching Shakespeare. Answer—language, language, language, language, language. Too true, too true. A thorny problem, Shakespeare's language. But every day in classrooms around the world, teachers are solving that problem. **Shakespeare**'s *editors have assembled what we believe to be six solid choices for helping students to sort out Shakespeare's words and their fickle ways. And to enjoy them. Some of these exercises are old— tried-and-true activities created by the hands of veteran teachers. Other exercises are new—tested in classrooms this year. They are all effective. Use them with our best wishes.*

EDITORS' CHOICE:
Sneaking Up on Shakespeare's Language

Once we have learned a language, we quickly forget the early steps of learning it—the necessary repetition, the time to examine the oddities, the aid of hearing it spoken aloud, the first faltering attempts to speak it ourselves. **Paul Stevenson,** *a former classroom teacher at Nathan Hale High School in Tulsa, OK, now the coordinator for his district's program for gifted and talented students, designed a plan to help students master Shakespeare's language in small doses long before they ever encounter a play. His approach relies on persistence, patience, and sensitivity to students in the beginning stages of early modern-language acquisition.*

By introducing students to the language before starting a Shakespeare play, we can preempt much of their negative reaction and give them an appreciation of Shakespeare's language as beautiful, expressive, potent, understandable, and fun. To carry out this strategy, copy quotations from the play students will read onto five-by-eight index cards—at least one for each student—spread throughout the play. Pick lines that illustrate moderate-to-difficult language problems. Start the activity at least five days before you study the play. Push the desks against the walls and ask students to stand in a circle.

DAY ONE: Give each student a card. Ask students to identify words or phrases they think are unusual or confusing. As they do this, use their examples to illustrate characteristics of Shakespeare's language: archaic and unfamiliar words; familiar words used in unfamiliar ways; second-person familiar pronouns and their

correlating adjectives (thee, thou, thy, thine---See *Shakespeare* Winter 1997); unusual word order; ellipsis; words shortened or lengthened to fit the meter, etc. Don't worry about covering everything---simply discuss the unusual language patterns as they come up.

On a corner of the chalkboard, start a running vocabulary list of unfamiliar words and familiar words used in unfamiliar ways.

After discussing the distinguishing features of Shakespeare's language, ask students to practice reading their quotations to the person next to them. Then go around the circle letting each student read. At the end of the activity, ask students to summarize what they have learned about Shakespeare's language.

DAY TWO: Give each student a different card and, to build confidence in their ability to speak the lines, have students stand in a circle and say their

lines as they did on day one. Then ask students to walk about the room. As they meet one another, have them take turns delivering their lines.

This is all for day two—keep it short and then teach something else, something that has nothing to do with Shakespeare.

DAY THREE: Repeat the walk-about

from day two, but each time students meet, they are to exchange cards after they deliver their lines, thus sending many lines through their brains and over their teeth.

DAY FOUR: Same as day three, only this time students add an appropriate action as they say the lines.

DAY FIVE: Organize the class into groups of three. Give each student a card and allow the groups ten minutes to develop a skit in which the actors use each of their quotations. Reassure them that silliness and fun are appropriate—it's okay to clown around with Shakespeare. After the skits, iden-tify the play from which the lines were taken and ask students to make guesses about it.

For homework, ask students to make posters illustrating the characteristics of Shakespeare's language. Display the posters around the room to use as reference. As you begin the study of the play, have students keep a journal of hard-to-understand sentences. Later, as the study of the play progresses, organize students in small groups and ask them to review their lists and report to the class the most interesting examples.

Reinforce what students have learned with quick mini-lessons as you find examples in the text or when students have questions. Once you are well into the play, give students a handout listing the major characteristics of Shakespeare's language (the material in day one, above). Ask students to analyze the characteristics and find examples.

You can measure the effectiveness of this plan by the amount of self-assurance and ease students display with Shakespeare's language. Did students find the quotation cards easier as the week went on? Could they identify language characteristics? Did the pre-study work carry over into the study of the play? By sneaking up on Shakespeare's language, students will approach the play with increased language skills and maintain them throughout.

EDITORS' CHOICE:
Demystifying Will's Words

When students' brains are on overload with the many strange sounds coming through their ears (and eyes), it is worth the time to interrupt your study and give them a few clear guidelines that will help them to understand Shakespeare's word patterns. No one does this better than **Martha Harris,** *North Community High School, Minneapolis, MN, who designed a concise Shakespeare-language primer that many teachers have used with unfailing success for eleven years.*

Shakespeare *is pleased to be the first to publish "Demystifying Will's Words." We have set it (beginning on the next page) so that it can be duplicated on a copier to make a booklet or printed on transparency sheets for overhead projection. Whatever the medium, it provides a reliable, lively path to solid ground, a wel-come retreat when students are caught in the swells of a choppy Shakespeare sea. Present it before studying a Shakespeare play or poem; stop everything and use it when language troubles seem overwhelming; or give it to students to keep as a permanent resource.*

The whimsical letter-men that illustrate this section are the work of Santa Rosa, CA , artist Leo Posillico. He can be reached at 707.568.5465 or www.id-ad.com/posillico

Page 3:   "You Listen So Well"
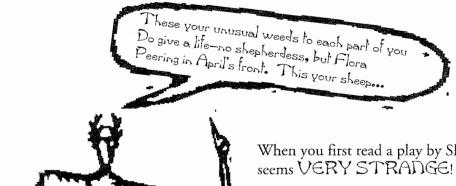Page 4:   "Spit It Out"
Page 7 (upper):
          "I Think We Need to Lighten Up"
Page 7 (lower):
          "Friendship Is Beyond Words"
Page 8:   "Enough Said"
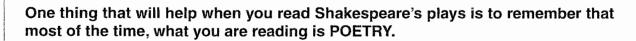
Demystifying Will's Words

*These your unusual weeds to each part of you
Do give a life—no shepherdess, but Flora
Peering in April's front. This your sheep...*

When you first read a play by Shakespeare, his language seems VERY STRANGE!

But once you start to catch on to some of the ways Shakespeare is using English, it will begin to make more and more sense.

YOU MAY EVEN START TO LIKE IT!

It won't ever be easy, but the more you read it, the more you'll start to understand

Shakespeare's Language.

One thing that will help when you read Shakespeare's plays is to remember that most of the time, what you are reading is POETRY.

Shakespeare didn't speak poetry when he was walking around London on his daily errands, but characters onstage in Shakespeare's time almost always spoke in verse.

Some of Shakespeare's verse has a familiar type of rhyme and rhythm:

Mary had a little lamb

Double, double, toil and trouble,
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.
Macbeth, 4.1.10-11

London bridge is falling down

Most of the time, though, Shakespeare's poetry has a different type of pattern. Much of his poetry doesn't rhyme, but most of it does follow a very steady

B E A T

IAMBIC PENTAMETER
5 beats per line
10 syllables per line

da DUH da DUH   da DUH   da DUH da DUH

⌣ /   ⌣ /   ⌣ /   ⌣ /   ⌣ /

1   2   3   4   5

⌣ /   ⌣ /   ⌣ /   ⌣ /   ⌣ /

How can these things in me seem scorn to you?

Shall I com-
pare thee to a
a summer's
day?

It's pretty amazing when you start to feel THE BEAT GOING ON AND ON...

1   2   3   4   5
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
1   2   3   4   5
Who is already sick and pale with grief
1   2   3   4   5
That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she.

This beat/syllable pattern is the reason that most of Shakespeare's lines look like this—

You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
Such as I am. Though for myself alone
I would not be ambitious in my wish
To wish myself much better, yet for you,
I would be trebled twenty times myself,
A thousand times more fair...
      —*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.2.149-154

instead of like this—

   You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand, such as I am. Though for myself alone I would not be ambitious in my wish to wish myself much better, yet for you, I would be trebled twenty times myself, a thousand times more fair...

The beat pattern—called the meter—is also the reason that a character's lines may start way over from the left margin. Two characters may share one 5-beat line.

          1   2   3   4   5
POLONIUS: Mad for thy love?
OPHELIA: My lord, I do not know.
      —*Hamlet, 2.1.95*

As you read Shakespeare's poetry, it will probably help if you read from PERIOD TO PERIOD (OR SEMICOLON) instead of always stopping at the end of the line—

There had she not been long but she became 〰️⟶ *Keep going!*
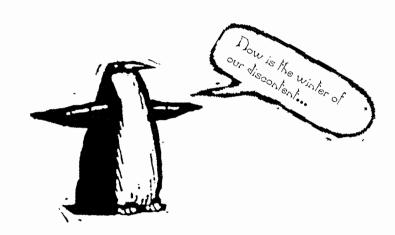〰️⟶ A joyful mother of two goodly sons; //
And, which was strange, this one so like the other 〰️⟶
〰️⟶ As could not be distinguish'd but by names.//

—*Comedy of Errors, 1.1.50-53*

Also, if you read OUTLOUD, the meaning will come a little easier. Try it with the speech above. Remember— Shakespeare wrote these plays as **SCRIPTS** for actors. The lines were meant to be **SPOKEN**.

Now is the winter of our discontent...

Since Shakespeare's day, many words have changed. How? Two Major Types of Changes:

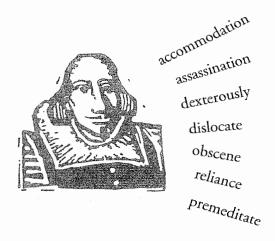**WORDS WE DON'T USE ANYMORE**

▸ Who would *fardels* bear?
▸ The *scrimers* of their nation
▸ he galls his *kibe*
▸ with *bisson rheum*

WORDS THAT LOOK THE SAME BUT HAVE DIFFERENT MEANINGS

▸ ... I could *fancy* (like) more than any other
▸ Examine well your *blood* (lineage).
▸ He's as *tall* (brave) as any man in Illyria.
▸ I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that *liked* (attracted) me.

Shakespeare knew A LOT of words– more than the average person in our time OR his:

accommodation
assassination
dexterously
dislocate
obscene
reliance
Premeditate

Shakespeare's vocabulary 30,000 words	Estimated vocabulary of an educated person today 15,000 words

He also created many **NEW WORDS** and played around with words through puns and other wordplay.

The list at the left includes just a few of the hundreds of words that FIRST appeared in his plays.

Shakespeare liked to play around with the ORDER of words. He did such things as:

REARRANGE WORDS

> That handkerchief
> Did an Egyptian to my mother give.
> —*Othello*, 3.5.55-56

instead of

An Egyptian did give that handkerchief to my mother.

OMIT WORDS AND LETTERS

I'll [go] to England.
—*Macbeth*, 2.3.137

$$o \! \! \times \! \! e \; r = o'er$$

Unless I have mista'en [mistaken] his colors much . . .
—*Richard III*, 5.3.35

WHY did Shakespeare do all of these things with language?

–sometimes to make the words fit **FIVE BEATS**
–sometimes because of the **RHYME**
–sometimes because he just liked to **PLAY WITH WORDS**
–but mostly because

THE WORDS SOUND GOOD THAT WAY

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day . . .

Sentence Scramble

Michigan State University professor **Randal Robinson's** *Unlocking Shakespeare's Language (NCTE) is full of exercises to help readers overcome specific problems with Shakespeare's rhyme, meter, pronouns, vocabulary, etc. Here is Michael LoMonico's adaptation of his excellent exercise on word order in which students predict the arrangement of words in a sentence.*

One problem that makes reading Shakespeare so difficult is word order. It seems when Shakespeare uses an unusual sequence of words, he tends to begin with that element which we would normally put last. So with a modern sentence such as "I ate the sandwich," Shakespeare would say, "The sandwich I ate." The following activity helps students to overcome this difficulty by letting them identify the major elements in a sentence and rearrange them in an attempt to find Shakespeare's sentence.

Take the final speech of *Romeo and Juliet* in which the Prince begins: "A glooming peace this morning with it brings." Begin this activity by printing each of the eight words of the Prince's line on a separate index card. Print large and make enough sets of cards so that each group of four to five students gets a pack. Shuffle the decks. Have each group find a space in the room to arrange the words the way they would say them in ordinary conversation.

Most groups will probably compose something like "This morning brings with it a glooming peace." After hearing each group's results, encourage them to try again, this time trying to imitate Shakespeare's style. If they haven't gotten it on the second try, ask them which of the three elements (*this morning, a glooming peace,* or *brings with it*) is the most important. They'll probably select "a glooming peace" and then they should be able to reproduce Shakespeare's sentence.

The next time they encounter a sentence with an unusual word order, refer to this sentence and this activity. They now have a tool to unlock a language problem.

Mangling the Language

Mary Ciccone, *Neville High School, Monroe, LA, has her students learn from the mistakes of Dogberry, the earnest but language-deficient watchguard in* Much Ado About Nothing. *In the process they become familiar with reference materials that will serve them well in the future.*

In Act 3, scene 3, of *Much Ado About Nothing* we are introduced to Dogberry, a villager who has just been appointed to serve as the watch, a position he takes very seriously. He tries to sound impressive, but his efforts result in a confused jumble of words and ideas.

Give students copies of *Much Ado* 3.3 and ask them to do the following:

First, find one or two sentences or phrases that sound impressive but are really absolute nonsense.

Next, look for malapropisms—words that are mistakenly used for other similar words. An example from today would be saying "Pepsi Cola, Florida" instead of "Pensacola, Florida."

Dogberry says "desartless" (line 8) when he should say "deserving." He confuses five other words in 3.3. Find them. List the line number, the malapropism, and the word he should have used. For help, consult modern dictionaries and C.T. Onions's *Shakespeare Glossary.*

Explication Checklist

For focusing on a passage and searching out every logical, visual, and verbal feature, nothing beats the system devised by University of North Carolina at Greensboro professor **Russ McDonald.**

Explication is a method designed to connect the ideas of a poem or a passage with the poetic devices that convey those ideas. A good analyst ought to be able, especially with a short passage, to account for the contribution of every line, perhaps even every significant word. The following list of suggestions is offered as a guide, not a set of iron-clad rules. It is not comprehensive, nor is every recommendation invariably helpful. The following topics and questions are useful for poems and poetic drama in general, but Shakespearean texts seem especially hospitable to them.

1. Read the passage for meaning. Pay attention to the sentence, not the line, as the principal unit of organization. Find the subject and verb. Forget, for the moment, about the poetry.
2. Try to summarize the main idea or ideas. (Do this in writing: having to commit conclusions to paper forces you to decide what you think.)
3. Outline the progression of ideas, identifying major sections. Is there a clear system of organization? Are there antitheses (there usually are in Shakespeare)? repetitions? indirections?
4. What is the specific and general context? How does context (speaker, situation) modify the speech? How does the passage

contribute to the scene? to the play at large?

5. Is irony a factor? Is there, in other words, a discrepancy between the character's words and meanings? Might this irony be unconscious? Or is the character consciously lying?

6. Identify the major and minor themes of the speech. How do these modify or support the general themes of the play?

7. How does the passage elucidate the character or the speaker? or those of other characters, off- or onstage?

8. What is the speaker's attitude toward the subject? toward the hearers? toward him- or herself? In other words, what is the tone?

9. Examine the diction of the passage. After reading for denotation (straightforward meaning), think about connotation. Look up important words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* to determine their currency in the Renaissance and to discover implied significance. Notice connections among roots of words, as well as alternative or archaic (but still applicable) meanings.

10. Think about wordplay, remembering that puns need not be funny. Consider multiple senses of words.

11. Notice the imagery. Is it particularly abundant? noticeably sparse? Do the images suggest patterns or form clusters? How do the images promote or clarify the subject?

12. What about the figurative language: similes, metaphors, and symbols? Analyze metaphors with an eye on both tenor (the thing being described) and vehicle (the thing used to describe it), and ponder the connotations of the comparison.

13. Are there classical,

biblical, or historical allusions? What do they contribute?

14. Do you find understatement, hyperbole, personification, paradox?

15. Study the syntax, the arrangement of words into sentences. Is word order normal or inverted? Do sentences seem simple or complex?

16. Does punctuation affect meaning? (Be careful with this one, since Renaissance punctuation is irregular and often added by editors.)

17. Examine meter as you have syntax. Is it regular or not? Look for run-on lines or important instances of caesura.

18. Pay attention to musical devices such as alliteration, rhyme, assonance, consonance, euphony, cacophony, onomatopoeia. Don't belabor these unless they are meaningful.

19. Disregard any of the above as you see fit, but do not disregard number 20.

20. For every device, the essential question is "how does it work?"

EDITORS' CHOICE:
Now and Then

For Shakespeare Set Free: Teaching Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, and A Midsummer Night's Dream *(1993),* **Chris Renino** *designed a method to demonstrate how elements of language and character continuously interact. He found lines from the end of the*

play—in this case Macbeth—*and connected them with lines the same character said earlier. In this comparison students look at words to see how characters change or how they stay the same.*

Lady Macbeth said each of the paired lines below. Each pair contains a line from her sleepwalking scene and a line she said in an earlier scene. They have been paired because they refer to a common incident or situation, primarily the murders the Macbeths have committed. Some of them use an important common word.

1. Open your book to the line from the earlier scene, reacquaint yourself with the situation in the play at that time, and write a summary paragraph of that situation and a summary paragraph of how you think the character feels as she delivers the line.

2. Look back to the line from Act 5 and write summary paragraphs of the situation and what you think the character is feeling as she delivers *this* line.

A. Hell is murky. —5.1.38
. . . Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell. —1.5.57-58

B. Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier and afeard? —5.1.38-39
What, quite unmanned in folly? . . . Fie, for shame! —3.4.88. 90

C. Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? —5.1.41-42
Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead / Are but as pictures . . . If he do bleed, / I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal—2.2.69-70, 71-72

D. What, will these hands ne'er be clean? —5.1.45
A little water clears us of this deed. / How easy is it, then! —2.2.86-87

E. Wash your hands, put on your nightgown, look not so pale. —5.1.65-66
Get on your nightgown, lest occasion call us / And show us to be watchers. —2.2.90-91